

37 EU GLOBAL STRATEGY EXPERT OPINION

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Previously, the EU used its soft power to influence international relations. However, after recent global power shifts, soft power alone is no longer enough. The EU lacks a single and coherent geopolitical vision, while few political leaders believe the EU can play a geopolitical role. Therefore, the main priority for the new EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS) should be to achieve a better balance between soft and hard power, in support of clearly defined geopolitical objectives.

Spheres of influence?

Of course, it is wrong to completely dismiss the EU as a geopolitical player for a number of reasons.

First, the European Commission used the EU's competition laws to stop Gazprom's South Stream pipeline project. As the network cannot be owned and used by the same entity, the European Commission successfully terminated the project, thus depriving the Kremlin of an instrument for 'buying' political influence through

bilateral pipeline deals with individual member states.

Second, unknown to most European leaders, Moscow considers the Union's enlargement and neighbourhood policies a huge success, as well as a threat to Russian geopolitical projects. As those EU policies interfere with what the Kremlin considers to be its sphere of influence, it was no surprise therefore that the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement sparked a major crisis.

The EU rejects the notion of new spheres of influence because the countries opted to join the Union or participate in its projects themselves. But Russia's fear was not entirely unfounded: one draft summit declaration stated that the region is of 'strategic importance' and the EU has an 'interest in developing an increasingly close relationship with its Eastern partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.'

The Ukraine crisis demonstrated that the 1991 Charter of Paris for a New Europe is a dead let-

ter. In the Charter, the parties agreed to ‘respect each other’s right freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic and cultural systems as well as its right to determine its laws and regulations’. The parties declared the principle of spheres of influence defunct. However, the only way to reduce tensions between Russia and the West is to acknowledge those spheres of influence. The new EUGS should recognise this geopolitical reality and initiate the development of a successor to the Charter of Paris.

The Ukraine crisis also demonstrated that soft power without hard power to back it up and the political will to coerce is meaningless. But the EU and European members of NATO are no longer credible military powers. This largely explains why the Kremlin could risk annexing Crimea and not fear the consequences of supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine.

A postmodern dilemma

The new EUGS needs to address the Union’s postmodern dilemma; namely, that the use of military force has become obsolete for Europeans while outside the EU, power politics and traditional notions of territorial security remain very much alive. Consequently, the new EUGS should introduce a clear concept of coercion, i.e. the threat or limited use of military force and economic sanctions to change the strategic calculations of an opponent.

Finally, the EUGS should also focus on China. Like Russia, China uses its state-owned enterprises and foreign direct investments to buy influence in Europe, thereby undermining the EU’s political unity. For example, China buys ailing

high-tech companies or stakes in firms such as MG, Volvo, Saab and PSA Peugeot Citroen, and invests in the financial sector, the energy sector, or infrastructure projects such as the harbour of Piraeus. Unlike the EU or Russia, China also exercises influence through bilateral agreements, such as the new Silk Road Initiative, and new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

In Asia, China does not consider the EU a geopolitical player, while Europe largely leaves affairs in the Asia-Pacific to China and the United States.

A regional trade strategy is lacking and the EU does not participate in region-wide economic initiatives such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC). Despite numerous declarations, resolutions and meetings, a coherent European foreign and security policy approach to Asia is lacking as well. This should all change.

The EUGS should contribute to a change in mindset of European leaders, as too many politicians are out of touch with geopolitical realities. They feel threatened by global power shifts and are becoming increasingly nationalistic and protectionist. Leaders must not only develop a coherent geopolitical vision, which takes the multipolar and fragmented global order into account, but must also know how to coerce. Ultimately, soft power without hard power is toothless.

